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ABSTRACT

A phenomenon which tends to transform the function and methods of traditional television consumption is the gradual reduction of its "mass" dimensions, which tend to disappear for an increasing share of the audience. This reduction of the mass dimension ranges from fragmentation of the audience to its segmentation, and, in the most extreme case, to its individualization. This is a phenomenon related to the opportunities provided by technological developments in the field, and leads to an increase in the number of choices confronting the viewer in a single instance. This accentuates the division of the public according to the different programs that can be received, and reduces the average indexes of public concentration on the individual channels. Moreover, traditional television is increasingly confronted with competition from other services on the same medium--e.g., videotexts, teletexts--and competition from other media for the same type of service--e.g., videocassettes. The transformation of traditional television consumption brought about by these changes, and by new services that will allow viewers to choose their own programs and watch them when they wish to, will radically modify the goals, problems, and questions that cultural policy in television has addressed for decades, as well as make changes in the organization and financing of television and its relationship to the audience. It is suggested that the multiplication of channels and the quantitative increase in the number of programs available will increase the value of television itself as there will always be "something on," and lead to greater dependence on the television medium. (CGD)

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New Trends in Television Consumption

by

Giuseppe Richeri

Presented to the 1986 International
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NEW TRENDS IN TELEVISION CONSUMPTION

by Giuseppe Richeri

abstract

From Fragmentation of the Audience to Fragmentation of Consumption.

One point of crucial importance which tends to transform the function and the methods of traditional television consumption is the gradual reduction of its "mass" connotations, which tend to disappear for an increasing share of the audience.

This phenomenon is related to the opportunities provided by technological development in this field, and leads to an increase in the number of choices confronting the viewer in a single instance, thus accentuating the division of the pubblic according to the different programmes that can be received, and reducing the average indexes of public concentration on the individual channels.

Moreover, traditional television is increasingly confronted with competition from other services on the same medium (if the television set is used to receive the services of videotexts or teletexts, the same set cannot be simultaneously used to receive one of the television programmes offered in that instance) and competition from other media for the same type of service (if the television set is used to watch a programme on videocassette or videorecord, the same set cannot be simultaneously used to receive one of the television programmes offered at that moment via cable or air).

The reduction of the mass dimensions of television appears to be undergoing three different phases, ranging from fragmentation of the audience, to its segmentation and, in the extreme case, its individualisation.

The fragmentation phase is evident in the multiplication of channels and the consequent increase in the quantity of transmitted and available programmes in a given moment on the same television set. The most concrete example of this is the case of the Italian television system where, between 1976 and 1979, through a very complex process which is beyond our concern, about 400 private local television stations developed alongside the public television station RAI and its two channels, and were quickly organised into national or inter-regional networks; at the same time a third public regional network arose, also belonging to RAI. Technological development in this case was minor, but its effects were crucial in that it improved the instruments of transmission as well as those of reception (television sets) so as to better exploit the hertzian frequency spectrum, thereby increasing the number of technically available television channels.

Consequently, if in the past each viewer could only choose among the programmes of the two public channels, as of 1979 the viewer could choose from among 12 to 20 programmes, according to geographic zones, transmitted by public or private stations. However, no considerable diversification of programmes accompanied the multiplication of channels; for the economic resources of private television were derived exclusively from advertisement, which imposed the law of viewing maximisation and, therefore, the law of competion. This was compounded by the lack of productive and professional

ability to develop an autonomous production for the individual private stations, a flaw compelling private television to resort to purchased programmes to fill their broadcasting schedules. The same dilemma would no doubt occur in other European countries which decide to liberalise private television stations.

Considering the broadcasting schedule of national and regional public channels, national and inter-regional networks, and various local independent television stations, together with the fact that every single viewer can now choose from between 12 and 20 different channels, the entire television audience in Italy today is divided, at a given moment, over at least 150 to 200 different television schedules; whereas the same audience, in 1976, was concentrated on only two television channels (RAI), which offered the same programming throughout the country. If it is true that the indexes of public concentration on the different channels is highly diversified,[13] it is equally true that a significant fragmentation of the mass public has been created. In this case, the public is not divided among the different channels according to a diversification or specialisation of the type and quality of programmes which can be received; rather, it is divided by the multiplication of substantially the same type of programmes in the same time slots.

The segmentation phase is what is now affecting Europe with the development of cable television networks (to be supplied by satellite, if necessary, and, in some areas, by scrambled wireless systems).[14] Both broadcasting systems allow the viewer to pay for either a periodical subscription (pay-TV or subscription-TV) or a consumption-based rate (pay-

per-view). In these cases, the main financial support is no longer supplied by advertising, which imposes the law of viewer maximisation, but by the expense which each user is willing and able to incur, in one way or another, for the reception of programmes. Pay-TV channels are therefore financially based on a more limited audience, which is nonetheless willing to spend money to receive the type and quality of programmes which traditional television does not offer. Thus, the broadcasting schedules of the channels are tendentially or prevalently of a single kind, and are aimed at audiences which are specialised or segmented according to television interests and consumption.

The individual pay-TV channels are different either because they broadcast the same type of programmes as traditional television, but of a higher quality (for example, new films versus old ones), or because they broadcast different types of programmes, offered infrequently or not at all by traditional television (for example, music, sports, information, children's shows, etc.).

Finally, there is the extreme case of specialised mono-genre channels, which always and only broadcast one of the various television genres. While in the case of fragmented television the division of the audience among different channels and, accordingly, the choice of the individual viewer at a given moment, is related to the individual programme broadcast by one of the channels in that moment (the individual film, show, documentary, etc.), in the case of segmented television the division tends to occur according to television genre (music, sports, cinema, information, etc.).[16]

The third phase, individualisation, occurs when the

individual viewer chooses which programme he or she wants to see and when to see it. This phase will be reached when large-band (optic fibre), bi-directional cable-tv networks will become operative. As we know, some countries (France and Great Britain) are already planning and developing these networks, in which some channels will be connected to programme or image banks. The individual viewer will be able to choose one of the programmes contained in these banks, to request it (by an electronically controlled alphanumeric keyboard) and to receive it by cable on his or her own television set. He or she will have to periodically pay a cumulative bill equal to the total sum of the prices for the requested programmes. In this case the scheduling concept of programme grid, which is fundamental to the organisation of traditional television channels and their relation to the audience, looses all meaning and vanishes. Television becomes a medium akin to video-recorders or video-disc, completely stripped of all the features of the traditional television model and its constituent elements.

These transformations radically modify the goal, problems and questions which cultural policy in television has addressed for decades, because there is a change in its organisation, its financing and its relation to the audience.

However, at least two significant repercussions of the general multiplication process of television channels can already be observed, and are posing general problems which are particularly interesting for public policy in the fields of communications, culture and liesure time, which can only be listed here. The first is related to the transition from a mass-audience television to a television aimed at audiences

which are distributed over many channels, while the second concerns the forms of television consumption in light of a multiplication of channels and the existence of remote control.

The multiplication of television channels and the diversification of audiences is accompanied by the appearance of a phenomenon of fragmentation of the cultural habitat, i.e., the dissolution of a common cultural horizon for society. If, for some observers, this represents a greater freedom of choice for the individual, for others it presents notable risks to the politico-cultural unity of a country, because it entails the dissolution of a medium of representation for society, shared at a mass level. Television, which has played a leading role in social and cultural integration in most European countries, now becomes the magnifier of social and cultural heterogeneity.

Furthermore, another strand of criticism points towards the tendency of the forms we have seen, i.e. fragmentation, segmentation and individualisation of the television audience, to reinforce social and cultural stratification, rather than to satisfy a desire for individualism. In fact, the criteria of programme selection would be increasingly connected to the spending ability of the individual viewers, to their cultural disposition and interests, and to their territorial distribution. With the multiplication of channels and the advent of remote control, it has been noted by empirical research that a new model of television consumption is being consolidated.

In regard to the general theory of choices in television consumption, two patterns can be distinguished at an abstract level: a pattern of fixed choice, involving the

selection of a previously known and desired programme (in its genre), and a pattern of explorative choice, based on the search for a programme which is selected each time on the spur of the moment, directed by a rapid scanning of the content and evaluated by means of brief exploration conducted mainly in a casual manner.

In the situation defined above, we can observe a "regression" in the selection dynamic, which involves the minimisation of planning and rational choice in television consumption on the one hand, and, on the other, the accentuation of viewer passivity towards the programme, together with a displacement of his or her preferences towards programmes with "narrative" contents, which induce passive dependence and are used more for the genre than for the plot, thereby facilitating interchangeability among channels broadcasting in the same genre. If this is true, it can also result in a progressive dependence on the medium, which can acquire value in itself. In other words, the television comes to possess an autonomous value, independent of its contents and the specific features of the programming supplied. Thus, the value of television itself increases, the hypothesis being that, given the wide range of programmes available, there will always be "something on". Therefore, the multiplication of channels and the quantitative increase of programmes leads to a greater dependence on the television medium.